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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE SIGNS ACCORD WITH CZECH REPUBLIC

1. (SBU) THE HOLY SEE SIGNED A JURIDICAL ACCORD WITH THE CZECH REPUBLIC JULY 25 REGULATING THE STATUS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH. THE AGREEMENT, REACHED AFTER THREE YEARS OF OCCASIONALLY DIFFICULT NEGOTIATIONS, GUARANTEES THE CATHOLIC CHURCH FREEDOM TO CONDUCT ITS ACTIVITIES, IN  
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PARTICULAR WORSHIP, GOVERNMENT OF ITS JURISDICTIONS, AND EDUCATION. IT ALSO RECOGNIZES THE CIVIL EFFECTS OF A CHURCH MARRIAGE. THE CZECH GOVERNMENT GUARANTEES THE CHURCH THE RIGHT TO OFFER PASTORAL CARE IN HOSPITALS, SOCIAL CARE CENTERS AND PRISONS. CATHOLIC SCHOOLS WILL HAVE THE SAME STATUS AS STATE INSTITUTIONS WITH COMMENSURATE RIGHTS AND DUTIES. THE AGREEMENT DID NOT ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF THE RESTITUTION OF CHURCH PROPERTY EXPROPRIATED BY THE FORMERLY COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT BEYOND HORTATORY LANGUAGE COMMITTING TO A RESOLUTION AT THE EARLIEST POSSIBLE DATE.

2. (SBU) THE CZECH REPUBLIC IS ONE OF THE LAST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES TO ENTER INTO SUCH A JURIDICAL AGREEMENT WITH THE HOLY SEE. ACCORDING TO MONSIGNOR MICHAEL BANACH, DESK OFFICER RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CZECH REPUBLIC, THE NEGOTIATIONS HAD BEEN DIFFICULT, AND THE HOLY SEE ULTIMATELY ACCEPTED LESS BINDING AND MORE NEUTRAL LANGUAGE THAN THEY HAD SOUGHT IN SOME AREAS IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE A TEXT ACCEPTABLE TO THE CABINET THAT WOULD HAVE A CHANCE OF SECURING PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL. BECAUSE OF ANTI-CLERICAL SENTIMENTS THAT STILL PREVAIL IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, THE HOLY SEE IS NOT CERTAIN HOW DIFFICULT PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL IS LIKELY TO BE.

3. (SBU) BANACH SAID THE HOLY SEE WAS PARTICULARLY PLEASED WITH THE OFFICIAL RECOGNITION OF CATHOLIC MARRIAGES AND THE RECOGNITION OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION ON A PAR WITH THE STATE EDUCATION SYSTEM. HE NOTED THAT THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM THE CZECH REPUBLIC HAD REMAINED RELATIVELY STRONG, EVEN DURING THE COMMUNIST ERA.  
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4. (U) COMMENT: THE HOLY SEE HAS CONCLUDED SIMILAR AGREEMENTS OR BROADER CONCORDATS WITH MOST COUNTRIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AS PART OF ITS EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN THE JURIDICAL FOUNDATION OF ITS PRESENCE THROUGHOUT THE REGION. POLAND, WITH A COMPLETE CONCORDAT IS THE FURTHEST ALONG, AND HUNGARY AND THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC WITH A SERIES OF AGREEMENTS ARE ALSO FAR ADVANCED. THE CZECH REPUBLIC AGREEMENT HAD BEEN THE MOST DIFFICULT TO CONCLUDE WITHIN THE REGION. THE HOLY SEE REGARDS AGREEMENTS WITH PREDOMINANTLY ORTHODOX ROMANIA AS UNLIKELY IN THE NEAR FUTURE, WHILE AGREEMENTS WITH BULGARIA ARE SEEN AS POSSIBLE BUT NOT IMMINENT.

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